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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ANKARA 000011

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/18/2021

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [TU](#)

SUBJECT: TURKEY: PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION CONTROVERSY GATHERS
STEAM

REF: A. 06 ANKARA 6723

[1](#)B. 06 ISTANBUL 2174

Classified By: Charge d'Affairs Nancy McElDowney for Reasons 1.4(b), (d)
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[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: The opposition's effort to prevent Prime Minister Erdogan from becoming Turkey's next president in May is underway; following the January 1-3 national holiday, skirmishes look set to intensify. Attempts to find a constitutional basis for calling early elections (reftel A) or neutralizing the ruling Justice and Development Party's (AKP) parliamentary control have proven unfruitful so far, but are an indication of the opposition's determination to create an atmosphere of uncertainty that might force the AKP to negotiate (reftel B). While the AKP has the votes in parliament to elect the next president, with or without the opposition's participation, an AKP-only vote carries the risk of triggering a crisis, as do opposition efforts to block Erdogan's presidency. Both the opposition and the incumbent president have ratcheted up the pressure by calling for early general elections, and a group of prominent jurists are muddying the waters with dubious assessments of the constitutional requirements for the presidential election. Another hard-hitting speech by Chief of the Staff General Buyukanit on December 23 added to the mounting tension. Lacking the votes in parliament, the opposition is working hard to galvanize those opposed to an Erdogan - or any AKP - presidential candidacy. The gloves are off and we expect increasingly aggressive tactics aimed at weakening the AKP and persuading the public that the republic is at risk. Erdogan's reaction to this strategy, which will intensify the atmosphere of uncertainty in Turkey, is the wildcard. END SUMMARY.

Erdogan and the Presidential Palace: Will he or won't he?

[1](#)2. (C) Speculation on Erdogan's intentions is running rampant, while the Prime Minister himself remains tight-lipped. The majority predict that Erdogan -- a man driven by personal ambition -- will not be able to resist the allure of the presidency, the highest position in Turkey. After his brief hospitalization for low blood pressure in

October, some observers also suggest that his health now requires a less stressful position such as the presidency.

¶3. (C) The other school of thought is that Erdogan the pragmatist has not made up his mind. According to an open-ended youth poll question asking who should be the next president (which AKP asked the pollster, Metropoll, not to publish), parliamentary speaker Bulent Arinc was the front-runner, with 9.9 percent, followed by Erdogan at 7.5 percent. Fifty percent of the 4,450 polled remain undecided, which Metropoll interpreted as a clear message that young Turks do not want Erdogan to become president. Metropoll's director Ozer Sencar claimed that AKP has been ordering presidency polls for the last seven months and hiding the results. Sencar cited several occasions when Erdogan's decisions appeared to be guided by poll results as evidence that he will not seek the presidency. A poll published this fall in Islamist daily Yeni Safak, which is close to the AKP, showed Erdogan in the lead but also acknowledged that 50 percent were undecided; this admission, undoubtedly printed with AKP permission, may provide Erdogan some cover should he decide not to run.

¶4. (C) The public's lack of enthusiasm for an Erdogan presidency stems from various concerns. Some Turks view Erdogan -- who is consistently Turkey's most popular politician, at 25-30 percent -- as young, relatively inexperienced, not sufficiently secular, and therefore not deserving of the presidency. Others argue that an AKP-elected president would not truly be representative since the AKP came into power with only 34 percent of the vote in ¶2002. Others complain that it is inappropriate for a parliament with only a few months remaining in its tenure to name the new president to a seven year term. While many

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dismiss Erdogan's wife's headscarf as a red herring, CHP leader Deniz Baykal's vitriolic attacks on the headscarf before the holiday suggest that it remains a potential flashpoint.

¶5. (C) Erdogan will also need to weigh whether his personal ambition should come at the expense of the horse he rode in on, and therefore be short-lived. Erdogan is the AKP's glue, binding together a diverse collection of Islamists, nationalists, and pro-EU types; without him, centrifugal forces may widen existing fissures and pull the party apart. None of his deputies have the charisma or prominence to reliably prevent fractures from hobbling the party. In such a case, a President Erdogan would not have much clout and any "AKP agenda" would hit the shoals.

¶6. (C) Many Turks voted for the AKP in 2002 not only because the AKP represented something new and untainted in an otherwise corrupt political environment, but because these newcomers, with their uncertain and possibly more religious agenda, would be safely anchored by state institutions like the presidency. An AKP grip on parliament, the prime ministry, and the presidency (the idea that any AKP candidate -- particularly Erdogan -- could actually divorce himself from party politics, as required by the constitution, has little credibility) could be a bridge too far and may result in a punishing backlash at the ballot box in November.

¶7. (C) These considerations, combined with the opposition's determined plan of attack, may persuade the AKP to put forward another candidate. Last week, Erdogan said publicly there might be a presidential candidate from outside the parliament. Defense Minister Vecdi Gonul has been mentioned as one possible candidate by some contacts. Or Erdogan might seek a candidate from outside politics altogether; some contacts consider Hikmet Cetin a possibility.

Sound and Fury: Absent the votes, raise doubts

¶8. (C) CHP leader Deniz Baykal this month proposed a four-stage "road map" for preventing an Erdogan presidency. The plan begins with submitting a draft law to hold an early election in March or April. Failing early elections, CHP would push for a compromise presidential candidate. Failing agreement on a candidate, CHP would resign en masse from parliament with Anavatan and True Path Party (DYP) MPs in tow. As a last resort, the opposition would refuse to vote in the presidential election. Given the AKP majority (354 of 550 seats), none of these steps could do more than fuel a sense of crisis and stoke unhealthy financial and economic instability.

¶9. (C) Given the limited options for thwarting the AKP in parliament, the opposition is working to galvanize other anti-Erdogan forces wary of eventual AKP control of the parliament, prime ministry and presidency. The officially apolitical President Sezer, a former Constitutional Court judge, publicly called for early elections during a meeting with Nationalist People's Party (MHP) head Devlet Bahceli. "Conditions" in Turkey necessitate early elections, Sezer said, adding that the new president should be elected by the new parliament. In a strongly-worded speech on December 23, Chief of Staff General Buyukanit warned against making "religion political instead of personal", hollowing out the concept of secularism, and condemning the country to "darkness". He emphasized that Turkey's Armed Forces will stand strong against "those who are underhandedly trying to take back in time" the Turkish nation.

¶10. (C) The latest tactic to neutralize the AKP's parliamentary control of the presidential elections was launched by former chief prosecutor of the High Court of Appeals Sabih Kanadoglu, who proffered a specious interpretation of presidential election procedures. Rather than apply the constitutional provision that states that at least 184 MPs are needed to convene parliament (Article 96), Kanadoglu misconstrued Article 102 to argue that at least 367

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MPs would need to be present to hold a vote. (Article 102 provides only that the president must be elected by at least 367 MPs in the first and second round of balloting, or at least 276 MPs in the third round.) With 354 seats, AKP alone would not be able to convene parliament to hold a valid first round of voting, Kanadoglu claimed, which would invalidate subsequent rounds and, ultimately, any election result. Whether or not the Constitutional Court would uphold Kanadoglu's seemingly untenable interpretation would be known only if a final election result were challenged. In the meantime, the debate added to the atmosphere of growing confusion and uncertainty.

Comment

¶11. (C) The gloves are off and the opposition's campaign to block an Erdogan presidency is underway. They are a long way from generating enough pressure to dissuade Erdogan and force the AKP to present a consensus candidate, but that is clearly the goal. They will continue to push Erdogan with the hope that he might stumble and lose his presidential cool, while also trying to convince the public, the business community and the media that an AKP presidency puts the republic at risk. The wildcard remains Erdogan's ego: every effort to pressure him not to run may only drive him to do it. We expect the battle to continue, with increasingly aggressive tactics, as the April 16 deadline for declaring presidential candidates approaches.

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